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SUBJECT: Chernobyl Report Met with Criticism by Some Experts

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Chernobyl Forum, comprised of several UN organizations, recently released its report on the consequences of the Chernobyl accident 20 years later. The report predicts much lower deaths and health effects than previously predicted and calls earlier assessments "exaggerated and incorrect," blaming most of the health problems on phsycological trauma stemming from the accident. The report, though positive, has met criticism in Belarus from independent researchers who called the information "biased" and largely incorrect. The overall concern is that the GOB will inappropriately use the report to justify massive economic development and repopulation in the contaminated areas while ignoring the need for continued monitoring, research, and cleanup. End Summary.

The Report

¶2. (U) On September 5 in Vienna, the Chernobyl Forum Q made up of eight UN agencies, including the International Atomic and Energy Agency (IAEA), World Health Organization (WHO), and UN Development Programme (UNDP) - released a report assessing the impact and consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear accident twenty years later. Titled "Chernobyl's Legacy: Health, Environmental and Socio-Economic Impacts" and based on the work of more than 100 international scientists and health experts, the 600-page report presented lower than expected figures on deaths and diseases related to radiation and called previous estimates exaggerated. According to the report, only 4,000 cases of radiation-related deaths could occur as a result of the accident and only 50 people have died to date. The report indicates that the greatest tragedy is the mental impact of Chernobyl on the population, which has caused negative self-assessments of health, beliefs in shortened life expectancies, and dependence on assistance from the state. The report suggests governments streamline programs to target the most needy and reduce the benefits given to those less affected. The full report can be found on www.iaea.org.

German Researcher Critical of Report

¶3. (C) On September 15, attachi and Chernobyl researcher at the German Embassy in Belarus Wolfgang Faust openly revealed his criticism of the Chernobyl report, particularly the information given by the GOB. Due to the high level of secrecy following the Chernobyl accident, few, if any, international scientists were able to gather evidence while Soviet authorities distorted or simply hid

the facts. According to Faust, the evidence provided by Belarusian authorities to the Forum is neither public nor accessible to independent scientists for further evaluation. Faust also highlighted that many of the scientists involved in the Chernobyl report have not visited the region, and if they had, then did not stay for long. Faust believes that proper research requires time and repetition in order to provide accurate and consecutive results. The report stated that no convincing evidence proves that the radiation from Chernobyl leads to cancer, to which Faust replied that such a conclusion is "completely false." As he explained, the science of radiation on human health is such a relatively new sphere of research that scientists still cannot determine the long-term consequences of Chernobyl, let alone provide a true corollary between the possible causes and effects.

¶4. (C) Faust accuses the scientists who wrote the report of being biased and catering to the world nuclear power lobby. He believes the question surrounding Chernobyl is and always will be political, especially today with Belarus' hopes to construct a nuclear power plant (NPP) and Ukraine's plans to build dozens more. According to Faust, scientists who work for large organizations and companies are concerned with getting a paycheck and, if they want to keep their job, are inclined to produce results their employers want to see. The IAEA, according to Faust, is more interested in promoting "safe" nuclear energy rather than caring about the possible health and social-economic consequences. He stated that many scientists believe an NPP can be 100 percent safe and country leaders want to convince the world that this is so. Faust believes that UN endorsement of this report will make it more difficult to have open discussions or debates about the IAEA and UN's findings. Even a member of Belarus' Chernobyl Committee,

which has been known to tow the government party line rather than provide objective analysis, confided in Faust that some things in the report were "completely wrong, if not false."

Belarusian Experts Equally Concerned

¶5. (C) Ivan Nikitchenko, agriculture specialist, scientist, and candidate at the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences told Poloff on September 8 that the report helps the GOB whitewash the consequences of Chernobyl and would be manipulated by the GOB to support its economic and social policy in the contaminated regions. Nikitchenko noted the GOB's efforts to liquidate radiation-monitoring stations in the afflicted regions, promote large-scale agriculture development, and repopulation. Nikitchenko said that the Forum did not consult him or his colleagues about the consequences of the tragedy nor did they participate in the report.

¶6. (C) Of particular concern to Nikitchenko is the government's ambivalence towards the population's health, which he called a modern-day "genocide." Due to lack of funding and government pressure, the Institute for Endocrinology, responsible for in-depth research on the effects of Chernobyl, closed three years ago and out of the 308 Radiation Security Institute monitoring stations in the contaminated regions, only 80 continue to operate. Government doctors continue to deny appearances of radiation-related illnesses, even though the number of heart attacks, muscle failures, cardiovascular problems, and aneurisms continues to grow. [Comment: The report claims the increase in diseases is due to better reporting and that there is no connection to radiation.] Nikitchenko gave one example of how doctors, in order to hide the number of fetus abnormalities due to radiation, pressure women to have abortions, regardless of their stage in the pregnancy.

The UNDP's Take

¶7. (C) On September 14, Alessandro Fracasetti of the UNDP office in Belarus agreed that the report was controversial but did not differ much from the previous 2002 UN report, "The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident: A Strategy for Recovering." Fracasetti also acknowledged the GOB's help with the report, including information given to the international scientists and health experts. According to Fracasetti, the report correctly refutes the paranoia and over-exaggeration of radiation effects on the population while not underestimating the importance of continued monitoring of food and the population's health. Fracasetti agreed with the report's suggestions for Belarus to reassess the zones of contamination, streamline the benefits given to the victims, and implement projects to rehabilitate local economies. The largest problem is that the affected population makes unhealthy decisions because it does not have adequate information about radiation and the proper behavior to help mitigate the effects. However, Fracasetti agreed the GOB could manipulate the facts of the report and he noted some examples of the government being more concerned with economic productivity than health.

Comment

¶8. (C) The psychological consequences from Chernobyl, including the dependency on state subsidies and the "victim" versus "survivor" mentality are visible problems in Belarus today. However, due to the unreliability of the GOB's information, the Chernobyl report should be read with some skepticism. The accident was veiled in secrecy for a long time and the USSR hid the facts from the population. A doctor from the U.S. National Cancer Institute who conducts research in the contaminated areas of Belarus informed Poloffs in March that many of the initial background radiation tests performed by USSR scientists/doctors following the accident were carelessly taken and generally inaccurate [Note: It is not known whether these same tests were used in the report.] Secondly, due to the government's sporadic funding and general ambivalence, no extensive monitoring and consistent research have been conducted to assess the long-term effects of radiation on a person's health.

¶9. (C) Another concern is that Lukashenko could construe the report's findings in a way to support his economic interests. The GOB is aggressively pursuing large-scale agricultural/rural development and international investment in some of the affected regions. Officials from the GOB's Chernobyl Committee, which was created to mitigate the consequences and actively participated with the UNDP on the report, told Poloff in February that their organization's primary concern was economic development and not health. Lukashenko visits the region each year on the Chernobyl anniversary and, via state media, declares that the area is safe to live in and the food is free from contamination. To some extent, the report justifies such statements from the GOB.